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August 6, 2008

**MEMORANDUM**

**TO:** Legislative Education Study Committee

**FR:** Peter van Moorsel *PvM*

**RE: STAFF REPORT: STATEWIDE CYBER ACADEMY/INNOVATIVE  
DIGITAL EDUCATION AND LEARNING (IDEAL-NM)**

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**INTRODUCTION**

The 2008 Legislative Education Study Committee (LESC) Interim Workplan includes a report on the status of the Innovative Digital Education and Learning-New Mexico (IDEAL-NM) initiative. In 2007, LESC-endorsed legislation was enacted to create the statewide cyber academy. That same year, the Legislature appropriated funds to implement IDEAL-NM. Both of these initiatives represent significant steps toward providing New Mexicans with access to online learning resources. Cooperatively administered by the Public Education Department (PED) and the Higher Education Department (HED), these initiatives aim to:

- provide eLearning services to P-12 schools, higher education institutions, and government agencies;
- reduce geographic and other barriers to educational opportunity statewide; and
- increase the computer literacy skills online learners need to participate in a global economy.

This report examines the structure of IDEAL-NM, with particular emphasis on the first phase of the project, the creation of the New Mexico Cyber Academy (NMCA). The report also addresses the progress made by PED and HED in implementing the project.

As a point of background, a similar report presented to the LESC during the 2007 interim discussed a delay in the implementation of IDEAL-NM that resulted because HED had been unable to contract for the use of a statewide learning management system (LMS), the technology platform needed by learners to access eLearning coursework. HED reported that the procurement process for the LMS was delayed due to the lengthy process that the Department of Information Technology (DoIT) uses to certify information technology (IT) funds<sup>1</sup>. DoIT certified and released the information technology funds in December 2007, and HED entered into a contract for a statewide LMS on May 30, 2008. The procurement of the LMS allowed the implementation to move forward, and, as a result, IDEAL-NM reports that the NMCA will be operational in August 2008.

## **IDEAL-NM AND NMCA FUNDING**

Since 2007, the Legislature has appropriated a total of approximately \$9.1 million to support the implementation of IDEAL-NM and the statewide cyber academy program. These appropriations include:

- \$7.4 million to HED:
  - \$1.0 million for the department's operational costs;<sup>2</sup> and
  - \$6.4 million to implement the IDEAL-NM system;
- \$1.67 million to PED:
  - \$1.5 million for the department's operational costs;<sup>3</sup>
  - \$120,000 to support regional education cooperative (REC) distance learning networks in RECs 3, 8, and 9; and
  - \$50,000 to the Rio Rancho Cyber Academy.<sup>4</sup>

The majority of the \$9.1 million in funding has been used to purchase the LMS; and the operational dollars were primarily used for staff salary and benefits, curriculum development, professional development, regional training centers (for RECs 3, 8, and 9 to train teachers and other school district staff to facilitate online learning), and IT services and maintenance costs. IDEAL-NM reports that the cyber academy will continue to work with New Mexico's nine RECs in FY 09 and adds that intergovernmental agreements (IGAs) are currently being drafted to delineate REC responsibilities. According to IDEAL-NM, REC #10 will serve as the fiscal agent for IDEAL-NM, and all RECs will work to facilitate student participation in online courses by providing assistance, training, and outreach activities to member schools.

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<sup>1</sup> All data processing appropriations also include language that the Department of Finance and Administration may not allocate the funds until it has received notice from the state Chief Information Officer that the project has been certified.

<sup>2</sup> The \$1.0 million includes \$500,000 in HED's budget for operational purposes, \$250,000 in the "other financing uses" category of HED's budget, and \$250,000 in SB 165, commonly known as the "junior appropriation act of 2008."

<sup>3</sup> The \$1.5 million includes \$500,000 for FY 08 and \$1.0 million for FY 09.

<sup>4</sup> The 2007 Legislature appropriated a total of \$155,000 to the Rio Rancho Cyber Academy. Of this total, \$50,000 was for the implementation of IDEAL-NM, and \$105,000 was for the operation of the Rio Rancho Cyber Academy. The 2008 Legislature appropriated \$63,500 to the Rio Rancho Cyber Academy.

## **IDEAL-NM STRUCTURE**

The main goal of IDEAL-NM is to establish a common infrastructure for online learning for the project's three main components: P-12 education, higher education, and state agencies. The three main objectives in accomplishing this goal are:

- Creating a statewide eLearning services center. The eLearning services center is the physical location for administrative staff for IDEAL-NM and the cyber academy. It is from the eLearning services center that IDEAL-NM staff provide technical support for users of the statewide learning management and web-conferencing systems;
- Implementing a statewide eLearning system that will provide online learning and professional development to P-12, higher education, and state agencies; and
- Creating a statewide cyber academy serving grades P-12.

### **Statewide eLearning Services Center**

The first objective, to create the eLearning services center, has been completed, with offices in Albuquerque that house the staff for IDEAL-NM, including the Executive Director, eLearning Technology Director, Academic Services Director, Student Services Director, and Project Manager (see Attachment 1 for the IDEAL-NM organizational structure). Staff at the eLearning services center is responsible for all aspects of the operation of IDEAL-NM and the cyber academy, including:

- administrative and technical help desk services for eLearning students, instructors, facilitators;
- academic services for students;
- course development;
- teacher training and professional development;
- scheduling and management of online courses; and
- continuing eLearning planning.

### **Statewide eLearning System**

The second objective of IDEAL-NM, creating a statewide eLearning system, is partially complete. The creation of a statewide eLearning system includes the development of a technological infrastructure capable of supporting all aspects of online learning that includes the following components:

- The Learning Management System (LMS) is the software used to manage learning activities through the ability to catalog, register, deliver, and track learners and learning, accessible via a web-portal. HED completed the process of procuring an LMS on May 30, 2008, when the department entered into a three-year contract with Blackboard, Inc. to provide a vendor-hosted statewide LMS for all school districts, charter schools, institutions of higher education (IHEs), and state agencies. According to IDEAL-NM, the LMS contract includes licensed software and software maintenance, out-of-state hosting services, training of personnel and training

materials, integration of Banner (a data management system used by IHEs), functional testing, and consulting services for 200,000 potential online users.

The contract also specifies that Blackboard, Inc. is responsible for:

- providing statewide train-the-trainer and administrator trainings, including training materials, as per a schedule developed in implementation planning;
- backing up and archive content data for one month; and
- performing functional testing, student information system integration testing, performance testing, and production readiness review.

IDEAL-NM will administer the LMS and establish protocols for implementation and access by July 15, 2008, and an independent validation & verification (IV&V) contractor will ensure that all project management activities and contract deliverables are met.

- The web-portal at [www.IDEAL-NM.org](http://www.IDEAL-NM.org) allows access to IDEAL-NM, and features links for P-12 online learning, higher education online learning, and state agency online training:
  - The P-12 online learning link allows students participating in the cyber academy to access the Blackboard LMS. The website allows students to register for and attend online courses, provides resources for students, and enables them to contact the Student Services Director for assistance.
  - The higher education online learning link provides an online learning clearinghouse, where higher education students and high school students participating in the dual credit program may access:
    - an online catalog of online courses;
    - a schedule of courses currently open for registration; and
    - links to the colleges and universities providing these courses.
  - The state agencies online training link will provide information about and access to state agency training courses, when available.
- The web-conferencing system will enable learners and instructors to interact face to face. According to IDEAL-NM, the web-conferencing system, for which the procurement process is currently underway, will operate within the Blackboard LMS environment.
- The help desk system allows users to receive online user support. HED has purchased help desk software called SysAid from Ilient, a provider of IT management solutions. The help desk software will serve as a tracking system for calls into the help desk, and will create status reports that describe and track the interventions that IDEAL-NM staff perform as a result of the calls. By reviewing the reports generated by the help desk system, IDEAL-NM may be able to assess the problems that online students and teachers encounter and improve the facilitation of online learning.

- The hosting centers are the physical locations of the technology to support online learning. However, PED and HED have not yet implemented these centers because they lack the funding to purchase and install them. As a result, the IDEAL-NM learning management system is hosted by the vendor, Blackboard, Inc., rather than at in-state sites.

### **Statewide Cyber Academy**

The third objective of IDEAL-NM is to create a statewide cyber academy to provide online courses to P-12 students statewide. The cyber academy operated as a pilot program in school year 2007-2008, offered 53 courses purchased from Aventa, an online course vendor, and two courses developed in New Mexico. According to PED, 246 students from 17 districts participated in the pilot.

The statewide cyber academy is expected to be operational in the fall semester of 2008, with the official opening scheduled for August 12, 2008. The cyber academy will offer a larger selection of courses developed in New Mexico and taught by New Mexico teachers. The components of the cyber academy include course development, online teacher training, and enrollment costs for online courses.

### ***Course Development***

Online courses may be purchased from a vendor or self-developed by course developers hired by the cyber academy. During the pilot phase (school year 2007-2008), the cyber academy purchased courses that were owned and hosted by a vendor. In this arrangement, the cyber academy paid a fee for every student enrolled in an online course (seat). Because the cyber academy does not own these purchased courses, however, it must continue to pay a fee every time that a student enrolls in such a course.

There are at least two advantages to the statewide cyber academy's developing, housing, and maintaining its own courses. One is that the cyber academy can use the same course in multiple semesters and school years without having to pay the fees charged by online course vendors. According to PED, once a course is developed, it would only require periodic revision to ensure that the course content is updated and other online features remain accurate and functional, at a cost of approximately \$1,200 every three years. Another advantage of course ownership is greater control over course content, allowing the cyber academy to ensure that the online courses are aligned with the state's academic performance standards as required by state statute.

In the fall of 2008, the cyber academy will offer both self-developed and purchased online courses, including:

- 19 courses developed by New Mexico course developers and taught by highly qualified New Mexico teachers (NMCA is currently developing an additional 18 courses for the spring 2009 semester);
- 15 courses purchased from a course vendor (Aventa) and taught by highly qualified New Mexico teachers; and
- 19 Advanced Placement courses via national providers.

PED reports that the average cost to develop a cyber academy course is approximately \$7,200, including the costs of:

- developing the course content;
- uploading the course content onto Blackboard;
- purchasing additional course content for inclusion in self-developed courses from the National Registry of Online Courses (NROC); and
- purchasing modular, interactive simulations in math and science for teachers and students in grades 6-12 from Explore Learning Gizmos to supplement online courses.

Two of the courses developed in New Mexico, Nanoscience and Fractal Math, were funded by 2007 legislative appropriation for “New Mexico national laboratories to recruit, train and equip mathematicians and scientists to offer middle, junior and high school math and science distance learning courses and to market these courses to schools across the country.” According to PED, these courses have not yet been marketed outside of New Mexico, and it remains unclear whether there is any demand in other states to purchase these two courses.

### ***Online Teacher Training***

The requirement in the federal *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* (NCLB) that all teachers of core academic areas be highly qualified applies to teachers of online courses as well as to teachers of traditional courses. Thus, the *Statewide Cyber Academy Act* requires that all online courses be taught by highly qualified teachers or, in the case of dual credit courses, by members of the faculty of accredited postsecondary educational institutions. According to IDEAL-NM, the cyber academy recruits highly qualified teachers statewide through its web portal and via announcements sent out to school districts. To be able to teach in the cyber academy, a prospective eTeacher must:

- be highly qualified to teach in the state of New Mexico with a teaching endorsement that corresponds to the content area being taught; and
- have experience as an online learner.

Before an IDEAL-NM teacher is assigned to teach a course, the teacher must complete the IDEAL-NM/Regional Educational Technology Assistance (RETA) eTeacher Training, or equivalent training. The RETA training is an eight-week online training aligned with the online teaching standards developed by the North American Council for Online Learning (NACOL). The training prepares eTeachers in both the pedagogical aspects of quality online teaching and the technical aspects of teaching within the Blackboard Learning Management System. Participants in this training are tested to ensure that all IDEAL-NM teachers meet the NACOL Quality Online Teaching Standards.

Following the initial eTeacher training, cyber academy teachers must also engage in a minimum of 16 hours each year of professional development activities specific to online teaching; and they must submit an annual professional development report that summarizes their professional development activities and identifies how knowledge gained in those activities has been applied to their teaching. IDEAL-NM, in partnership with RETA, offers various professional development activities and trainings throughout

the year, most of which are delivered in an online format with both synchronous and asynchronous components.

According to IDEAL-NM, a total of 50 eTeachers will be trained and qualified to teach in the cyber academy by August 2, 2008, and IDEAL-NM plans to train an additional 50 eTeachers by June 30, 2009. The cyber academy eTeachers trained for fall 2008 include:

- 25 teachers in the first cohort (spring 2008);
- 13 teachers in the second cohort (summer 2008); and
- 12 course developers who are also licensed, highly qualified teachers.

### ***Course Enrollment Costs***

One of the main costs of the cyber academy is the eTeacher's salary. School districts do not pay their teachers extra for courses that they teach via the cyber academy. Rather, IDEAL-NM contracts with the eTeachers, who are paid a per-student fee for each semester-long course that they teach via the cyber academy. According to the IDEAL-NM, school districts must pay \$200 per semester seat (equivalent to one student enrolled in one semester-long class) to cover the eTeacher and other support costs. IDEAL-NM will invoice school districts upon student registration. If a student drops the course within four weeks of the official class start date, 50 percent of the \$200 will be refunded. IDEAL-NM adds that further refunds are not provided because, like brick-and-mortar schools, IDEAL-NM must pay their contracted teachers even though some students may drop from courses.

In setting the cost of \$200 per semester seat, HED and PED based their estimate on the average returning teacher salary, the average number of classes taught per year, and the average number of students per class, as follows:

Average Returning Teacher Salary	\$59,000
Divided by the average number of classes taught per year (10)	\$5,900
Divided by the average number of students per class (30)	\$197
Rounded	\$200

## **HIGHER EDUCATION AND STATE AGENCY TRAINING**

Most of the progress on IDEAL-NM has been applied to the first of the three components noted earlier in this report—P-12 education. The other two components—higher education and state training—are largely in the planning stages although some features of the higher education component are in place now.

### **Higher Education**

Institutions of higher education have used online education since well before the advent of IDEAL-NM, and have developed significant libraries of online courses and entire programs of study. When fully implemented, IDEAL-NM will allow higher education and dual credit students to register for higher education courses at all institutions throughout the state via the IDEAL-NM web-portal.

Currently, the higher education link of the IDEAL-NM web-portal provides the online clearinghouse mentioned on page 4 that provides a catalog and a schedule of online courses currently offered online, as well as links to the 22 colleges and universities providing these courses. The course catalog identifies the higher education institution providing the online course, and provides other course information, including prerequisites, the course schedule and duration, course level, credit status and number of credits, delivery method, and instructor. In addition to the course catalog, the online clearing house provides information on available programs of study, listed by the type of program, including certificate, associates, bachelors, masters and doctoral programs, and identifies the college or university offering the program.

Currently, students cannot register for individual courses or programs of study directly via the IDEAL-NM web-portal; instead they must access the websites of each institution of higher education to register for courses. Furthermore, because they are not standardized, course costs and admission and registration policies may differ depending on the institution from which a student intends to purchase a course. These are some of the issues that must be resolved before the higher education component of IDEAL-NM is completed.

### **State Agency Training**

IDEAL-NM calls for the development of online courses to be used by New Mexico governmental agencies for staff training. Among the advantages to this development are:

- reduced employee travel time and associated costs;
- expanded training opportunities; and
- self-paced instruction and flexible scheduling.

IDEAL-NM reports that, because there is currently no budget to develop online training courses, this component will be implemented in a later phase of the project. Even so, IDEAL-NM also reports that several agencies have submitted an online “Participation Request” form to IDEAL-NM, among them:

- PED;
- HED;
- the Department of Workforce Solutions;
- the Corrections Department;
- the Regulation and Licensing Department;
- the Board of Nursing;
- the Environment Department; and
- the General Services Department.

In addition to the agencies that have submitted a participation request form online, the following agencies have also expressed interest in providing online training via IDEAL-NM:

- the State Personnel Office;
- the Department of Health;



- the Department of Homeland Security; and
- the Department of Public Safety.

## **ISSUES**

The staff report presented to the LESC during the 2007 interim identified several issues regarding the implementation of IDEAL-NM. These issues, as well as additional issues identified by LESC staff in the 2008 interim, are addressed below.

### **Certification of Funds**

As addressed earlier in this report, and as initially reported to the LESC during the 2007 interim, HED reported that the process of certifying the \$6.4 million appropriation to HED for FY 08 for IT costs for IDEAL-NM resulted in a delay in the release of the funds. Together with a lengthy RFP process, the process of certifying the IT funds resulted in significant delays in purchasing the LMS software. To allow HED additional time to procure the LMS, the 2008 Legislature reauthorized the \$6.4 million appropriation to be expended through FY 10. A learning management system has since been procured, and it appears that this issue has been resolved.

### **Outreach**

A second issue reported to the LESC during the 2007 interim concerns awareness of the cyber academy. LESC staff conducted a survey to determine, among other things, whether public schools were aware of the implementation of IDEAL-NM and the cyber academy. Several of the survey respondents stated that they would require more information about course availability, cost, and quality before participating in the cyber academy; and others responded that they were not aware of the cyber academy's implementation. Based on these responses LESC staff reported that eventual cyber academy participation and enrollment might benefit from an effort by IDEAL-NM and the cyber academy to spread awareness of the cyber academy's current and future course offerings and costs.

In an effort to spread awareness of the project, IDEAL-NM staff, as well as other PED and HED staff, have conducted a large number of outreach activities during 2008, including:

- site visits or conference calls to New Mexico school districts and RECs;
- IDEAL-NM announcements in HED, PED, and New Mexico Learning Network (NMLN) publications;
- creation and online distribution of the eLearning Services Plan, including student, teacher, and school/district handbooks;
- creation of the IDEAL-NM web-portal discussed previously in this report;
- presentations to various stakeholders, including the Council on Technology in Education, the New Mexico State University School Counselor Conference, the Alliance for the Advancement of Teaching and Learning, and the Virtual Schools Symposium, a national online learning conference organized by the North American Council for Online Learning; and

- a joint memorandum by the secretaries of public education and higher education announcing updates, the grand opening, student and teacher handbooks, pricing, and available courses (see Attachment 2).

The HED/PED outreach and communication campaign may be succeeding. During the 2008 interim, the Legislative Finance Committee (LFC) staff conducted a survey of school districts regarding participation in the cyber academy. According to LFC, of the 45 districts that responded, 90 percent were aware of the IDEAL-NM initiative.

### **Distance Learning Rule**

The *Statewide Cyber Academy Act* requires PED to promulgate rules to carry out the provisions of the act. Although related distance learning rules are in place, they do not specifically address the cyber academy. Without rules that regulate school districts' ability to enter into contracts with distance learning providers outside of the cyber academy, school districts might duplicate the services provided by and the costs of the cyber academy. Already there are two examples of the problem of duplicating costs and services:

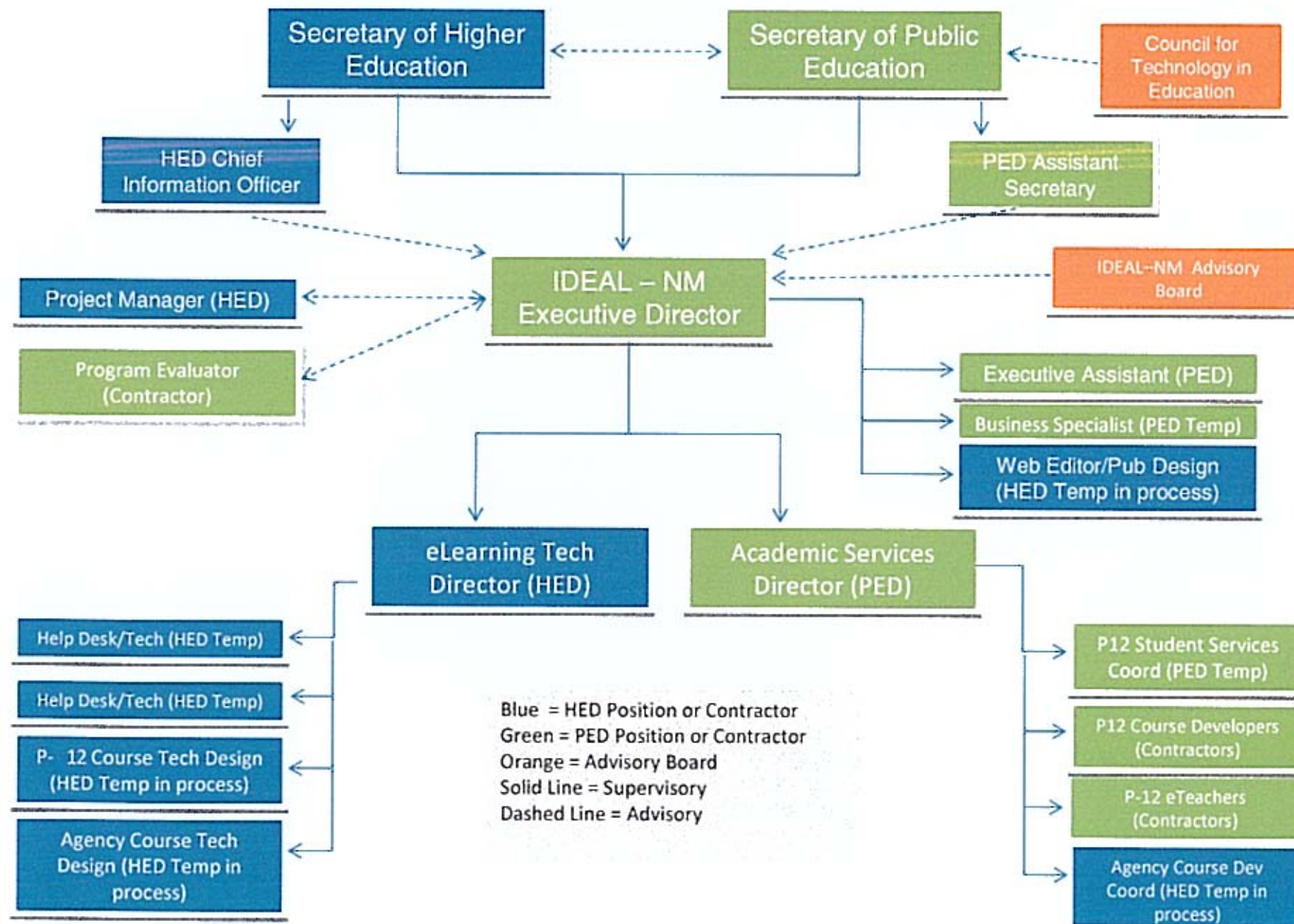
- in June 2008 the school board of Clovis Municipal Schools approved a \$226,400 contract with the PLATO virtual school program; and
- as an ongoing initiative, the Rio Rancho Cyber Academy duplicates some of the services offered by the statewide cyber academy.

PED reports that it is currently planning a "repeal and replace" of the current distance learning rule. Notification and publication of the new rule were scheduled for July 17 and July 31, respectively, and a public hearing on the rule is scheduled for September 3, 2008.

### **Grades Served**

IDEAL-NM aims to provide eLearning services to P-12 schools, and its web-portal includes a P-12 online learning link. However, the *Statewide Cyber Academy Act* requires that the statewide cyber academy provide distance learning courses for grades 6 through 12. In order to authorize the statewide cyber academy to develop and provide courses for students in pre-kindergarten through grade 5, the committee may wish to endorse legislation expanding the statewide cyber academy to serve the students in these grades.

# IDEAL-NM ORGANIZATION



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ATTACHMENT 1



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SECRETARY OF HIGHER EDUCATION

DR. VERONICA C. GARCÍA  
SECRETARY OF PUBLIC EDUCATION

June 5, 2008

Dear Superintendents, Principals, and District Staff:

We have several exciting announcements about the upcoming August Grand Opening of IDEAL-NM (Innovative Digital Education and Learning NM) that will provide your districts with broader access to online learning opportunities.

Shared technology resources. Blackboard, Inc. has been selected to provide a statewide online learning management system. This means that all districts and higher education institutions will have access to the same technology tools to use, develop, migrate, share, and offer courses. The cost savings and benefits associated with this contract are significant, and IDEAL-NM will facilitate state implementation.

Summer school. As an extension of our pilot program, we have 12 credit recovery courses available for immediate registration. Go to [www.ideal-nm.org](http://www.ideal-nm.org) and click on the P-12 link for complete details. eLearning can be an effective option for credit recovery. The 12 courses are: Refresher Math, Pre-Algebra, Algebra I, English I, English II, English III, New Mexico History, American Government, American History, Earth Science, Physical Science, and Biology.

Advanced Placement. Effective August 2008, districts may register students at [www.ideal-nm.org](http://www.ideal-nm.org) in AP courses and we will take care of the approval protocols for state payment.

New courses. While we still have a full lineup of online courses brokered via Aventa Learning, we are developing more New Mexico courses for fall enrollment. In addition to Algebra I and New Mexico History developed and piloted this year, new courses in development include: Financial Literacy, AP Computer Science A, Fractal Math, Nanoscience, Biology, Chemistry, Environmental Science, Physics, Psychology, Spanish I, Government, History and Geography. Please let us know if you have a particular course you'd like to see us develop.

Handbooks. School and student handbooks can be valuable assists in planning for online courses. They can be viewed at [http://www.ideal-nm.org/index.php?action=portal&page=k12&content=info\\_for\\_schools](http://www.ideal-nm.org/index.php?action=portal&page=k12&content=info_for_schools).

Pricing. IDEAL-NM was founded on the principles of quality and designed, not only to expand educational opportunities, close achievement gaps and improve graduation rates, but also reduce costs to the district by:

- Giving them full access to a no-cost state-of-the-art Learning Management System (LMS) that can be used to deliver online courses to their own students, and to enter into agreements with other districts to share resources.
- Facilitating a state network of highly-qualified online teachers employed by districts and utilized in behalf of statewide students. This is especially important for districts unable to recruit teachers in critical disciplines, or for those who don't have enough students to support full teaching loads.

- Keeping per-student, per-class costs below the average SEG rates.
- Providing a full continuum of core and elective courses at costs below national norms.

The best eLearning courses are taught by highly-qualified eTeachers utilizing interactive teaching tools. eLearning courses that cost less do not have highly-qualified eTeachers that actively engage students. Districts are encouraged to consider price vs. quality when deciding which options to choose. The IDEAL-NM price of \$200 per semester seat is very competitive nationally, and that money is used to pay the teacher.

REC incentive. RECs can fulfill vital roles in facilitating eLearning innovations. In recognition of that, IDEAL-NM will reimburse RECs \$200 for each of up to 100 semester seats. Small districts that are not part of an REC may contact IDEAL-NM directly for similar arrangements. This is in keeping with legislation requiring regional hosts and priority for geographically-isolated schools.


Distance learning rule. We are working on a Repeal and Replace of the current distance learning rule (NMAC 6.30.8) to include: guidance regarding open enrollment and distance learning, district and school participation parameters, student enrollment, program quality, and the statewide distance learning service center program. Notification/publication is expected in June and public hearing is expected the end of July. Details will be posted on the PED and IDEAL websites as they become available.

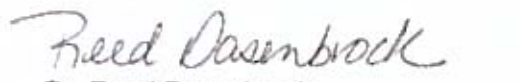
Relocation. In early June, the IDEAL-NM office will move to 5201 Eagle Rock, within two blocks of the CNM Workforce Training Center off of I-25 and Alameda in Albuquerque. The location is central to New Mexico and convenient to both those traveling off of I-25 or I-40. We will send out our new phone numbers as soon as we complete the move.

Policy retreat. The New Mexico eLearning Policy and Planning Retreat held in April focused on IDEAL-NM, and brought forward important policy recommendations, including statewide online dual credit facilitation, REC involvement, and alignment with the High School Redesign Act. The complete report can be accessed at the News & More link of [www.ideal-nm.org](http://www.ideal-nm.org).

Please contact IDEAL-NM Executive Director Dr. Tim Snyder ([tim.snyder@state.nm.us](mailto:tim.snyder@state.nm.us) or 505-629-9533) for any assistance or questions. Also, look forward to more information, announcements, and opportunities for discussion at the July 23-25 NMCSA/PED conference.

Sincerely,

  
Dr. Veronica C. Garcia  
Cabinet Secretary of Public Education

  
Dr. Reed Dasenbrock  
Cabinet Secretary of Higher Education